

EPAPHRODITUS, SCRIBE AND COURIER.

IN a previous study of the manner of composition of an ancient letter,¹ and in particular of the letters which form so large a part of the New Testament, we endeavoured to eliminate from the general structure of such compositions the conventional phrases and turns of speech which characterized a correspondence carried on in Greek, and to classify them roughly under various heads, such as—

- (a) Thanksgiving for good news received, together with other forms of congratulation, and pious wishes.
- (b) Prayers for the general welfare of the correspondent, especially such as turn on health of body or soul, or the maintenance and increase of worldly prosperity.
- (c) General expressions of joy over a beloved object, whether lover or friend, etc., etc.

Now, in making an examination into these conventional expressions in early Greek correspondence, we found that the Epistles in the New Testament furnished a multitude of phrases closely and almost identically parallel to those which we were able to isolate from early Greek papyri; and by taking an epistle in which they were especially conspicuous, such as the first Epistle to the Thessalonians, we were able to show that the conventional expressions contained in that epistle betrayed the existence of similar elements from a previous correspondence between Paul and Thessalonica, so that it stood third in a series of letters

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which had passed, of which the first two had altogether perished.

The importance of this conclusion was not slight; for, first, it established the general genuineness of a very peculiar composition as against the theory of forgery, and perhaps also against the hypothesis of very extensive interpolation; for the application of critical methods is not sufficient to bring up from the pages of a *forged* or widely interpolated document the features of an underlying previous correspondence. It is, in fact, useless to apply re-agents in search of palimpsest writing where the vellum has only been used once. So that, unless the forger produces a whole series of letters which are mutually connected, we shall not find in his composition those delicate allusions to previous history and the previous interchange of thought which the critical processes bring to light.

But, second, the examination which we made showed the method which St. Paul adopted in writing a reply to a letter, and the method in which he composed a letter; nor need the remark be limited to St. Paul, for the method is largely Oriental and conventional.

When he composed a letter, we know from his own language that he usually employed a secretary or scribe. To this scribe he dictated the terms of the letter, perhaps giving him the very words, especially where the language becomes impetuous and the syntax anacoluthic; but also at times indicating the trend of the communication and leaving the scribe to put it in words, with the natural result that the scribe may sometimes give us the wrong word or the incorrect meaning. The usage is precisely the same as that which still prevails in Eastern life, where the great man (patriarch, primate, or what you will) calls over to his secretary the terms of his proposed communication, perhaps revises it rapidly, adds a few words of his own, and seals the document with his private seal. The Pauline

Epistles are full of allusions to this method, so that we can not only classify (a point to which we referred in a previous article) his postmen (both going and coming), but we can isolate a little group of favourite scribes, of whom it is not unreasonable to hope that we may some day recognise individual peculiarities. But, further than this—a point which is almost involved in what has gone before—we may say that when Paul replied to a letter, he held the letter that he was replying to in his hand and followed closely the points in it that needed attention. He did this so closely that he not only answered the inquiries of the writer, but he even answered and echoed his opening salutations, and duplicated his method of farewell. And it is this close treatment of the unimportant matter before him that is our best warrant for believing that he treated with similar detail the actual and important business that the correspondence turned on. For he would not have been at such pains to take up the very words of his correspondent's greetings unless he had also been in the habit of handling in a like manner the more important sentences of their communication. In this way we establish the general correctness of Prof. Lock's acute analysis of certain passages in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, where he isolates expressions in the text as quotations from a letter to which Paul was replying, and pleads for the insertion of them between marks of quotation, *e.g.*, 1 Corinthians 8. 1 :—

“Now concerning idol-offerings, we know that we all have knowledge.” Knowledge puffeth up, but love buildeth up. If a man thinks he knows aught, he knows naught, etc.

The quotation marks show that he is not scolding himself and his companions, but his correspondents. So we find ourselves introduced into a new factor in the interpretation of Paul's Epistles, which consists in the isolation,

either by marks or by special type, of such parts as really belong to his correspondents. Whether, then, we take Prof. Lock's canon of concealed quotations or our own method of scrutiny of the conventional epistolary forms, we come to much the same result. We see the way in which the Apostle worked, and we learn that he is not responsible for all that is printed under his name, for there may be whole sentences that belong to the earlier and antecedent factors of the correspondence, and there may be cases where the language is not his own, but is either that of his secretary or that which is common to all secretaries. And it is clear that these considerations to which we have drawn attention will require a good deal of reform to be made in the linguistic and the homiletic treatment which have been bestowed upon the Pauline Epistles. We must not, for instance, say of a peculiar expression that this is characteristically Pauline, when it may be that it is due to a Corinthian scribe, or when it may be merely a conventional turn of the Greek ready letter-writer. We will take an instance or two in support of these positions.

It will be remembered that in discussing the passage 1 Thessalonians 2. 13 (*καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἡμεῖς εὐχαριστοῦμεν, κτλ.*) we pointed out that the use of *καὶ ἡμεῖς* implied that he was reading an expression of thanksgiving on the part of the Thessalonians, and that he was re-echoing it. Now it is clear that we are not entitled to isolate such an expression and reconstruct the parallel and previous member of the Thessalonian communication, unless we are prepared to deal in a similar manner with similar expressions in the other Pauline Epistles.

For example, in Colossians 1. 9 we have the similar turn—

διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἡμεῖς, ἀφ' ἧς ἡμέρας ἠκούσαμεν, οὐ πανόμεθα ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι.

Here it is implied that he is replying to a letter in which the writer or writers had said that they prayed for him

constantly, which indeed we have shown to be one of the conventional ways (however sincere) of beginning a letter. It follows from this that the Epistle to the Colossians should be headed something as follows :—

To Colossians :

a reply to kind inquiries in a letter brought by Epaphras.

This conclusion is abundantly confirmed by the context, where we find also a stray expression lying, which the Apostle has picked up along with the opening prayer from the very beginning of the Colossian epistle ; for after saying that he gives thanks at having heard (sc. by letter) of their faith, he goes on to remark that the Gospel is καρποφορούμενον καὶ αὐξανόμενον in all the world, *as it is amongst yourselves*, and then a little lower down returns to the same expression, which had evidently caught his fancy, and prays that they may advance spiritually and be καρποφοροῦντες καὶ αὐξανόμενοι in the knowledge of God.

No doubt, then, the opening verses of Colossians are a part of a real letter. And this suggests some further inquiries ; for we may ask whether modern commentators upon Colossians have seen this feature of the epistle ; and, if they have seen it, have they used it either to illustrate the epistle, or to solve the riddle of its perplexing relations with its companion epistle, viz., the Epistle to the Ephesians.

Let us try Lightfoot¹ *in loc.* ; we shall find as follows :—

“ For διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἡμεῖς in an exactly similar connexion see 1 Thessalonians 2. 13. . . . In all these cases the καί denotes the *response* of the Apostle’s personal feeling to the favourable character of the news.”

The italics are our own. It will be seen that Lightfoot comes very close indeed to the point of our argument ; he sees that the two cases cited are similar, and he sees that

¹ Lightfoot in *Col.* i. 9, p. 203.

the Apostle is, in each case, replying to something. But he just misses the point that Paul is replying to written, and not merely oral, communications: he loses his letter in the postman: and this defect is characteristic of Western as distinct from Oriental life; the Eastern entrusts his message, not to a messenger, but to a paper *plus* a messenger. Epaphras no doubt brought a string of communications from the Churches through which he passed; but they were probably packed away, not in his head, but in his head-gear. As he passed from city to city they multiplied; for almost all Churches would wish to express similar inquiries as to the Apostle's condition and needs, and to make reports as to their own state. These things could not easily be done orally, and would not be so done except in a very limited degree.

It will be seen, then, that Lightfoot comes very near to the explanation of Paul's language in the passages referred to.

Dr. Moule, also, in his "Notes on Colossians" in the *Cambridge Bible for Schools*, comes near to the same conclusion, *e.g.* Colossians 1. 9:—

For this cause] in view of the whole happy report from Colossæ.

We also]. The "*also*" means that the news of the loving life at Colossæ was *met* by the loving prayer of Paul and his friends.

But curiously, while he has (no doubt under the influence of Lightfoot) recognised the echo in Paul's sentiments to the Colossians, in his remarks on a similar passage in Ephesians 1. 15 ("For this cause I also . . . do not cease giving thanks," etc.) he misses the point almost entirely by saying,—

I also] as well as others who have you in their hearts: a touch of gracious modesty.

where there would seem to be a well-intentioned effort to

put the highest construction possible on the fact that St. Paul was—answering a letter!

Dr. Moule, by his comment upon the parallel passage in Ephesians, takes us into the heart of a famous critical problem; though I doubt whether he would allow that any such problem existed. We will come presently to this question. Meanwhile let us approach it slowly by trying what Dr. S. Davidson thought of the Pauline epistolary “we also.” He tells us as follows¹:—

“In Colossians 1. 9 ‘we also,’ referring to Epaphras as well as the writer, is appropriate; but the ‘also’ is retained in the corresponding passage Ephesians 1. 15, though Epaphras is not mentioned there.”

We are advised, that is, by Dr. Davidson that the Epistle to the Ephesians has been imitating Colossians, and imitating it so badly as to misunderstand it! In other words, the Epistle to the Ephesians is a clumsy forgery. It is sufficient to remark that the words in which the imitation lies (or is supposed to lie) are conventional, and that they relate not to Epaphras but to certain Greek correspondents who use fixed literary models.

Dr. Davidson has, by his parallel quotations and absurd comments on them, taken us into the heart, as we said above, of a critical problem, viz., that of the parallelism and supposed interdependence of Colossians and Ephesians, with which must be connected the general question of the character of Ephesians; and concerning this we may venture a few remarks.

When in Ephesians 1. 15 we find the sentences—

διὰ τοῦτο καὶ γὰρ, ἀκούσας τὴν καθ’ ὑμᾶς πίστιν ἐν τῷ κυρίῳ
 Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους [ἀγάπην], οὐ
 παύομαι εὐχαριστῶν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν μνείαν ποιούμενος ἐπὶ
 τῶν προσευχῶν μου,

¹ *Introd. to N.T.*, ii. 275.

we must say, in explanation of the words "I also," linked to a conventional epistolary expression—

(i.) That he has had a letter, which indeed is the meaning of "since I heard";

(ii.) That this letter expressed the prayers of certain people on his behalf.

The Epistle to the Ephesians is, then, a reply to an actual letter received, and cannot be a circular letter at all, as has often been maintained. Consequently, if the words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ are lacking in the opening of the epistle in some leading codices, the explanation is more probable that some other name has been removed than that a blank was left to be filled up variously. And this immediately suggests that we write with Marcion the words ἐν Λαοδικίᾳ.

Nor are there wanting other suggestions in the Epistle to the Ephesians that the Apostle is replying to a written communication. Both here and in Colossians there are traces of anxious inquiries made after his welfare under the untoward circumstances of prison life. These inquiries are the cause of the replies in—

Ephesians 3. 13: I beg you not to lose heart over my tribulations on your account, for they are your glory.

Ephesians 6. 21: In order that you may know my state, and how I do, . . . I have sent Tychicus to you [with this letter], that he may comfort your hearts.

The same sentiment almost *verbatim* in Colossians 4. 12.

Obviously there would have been no need of a comforting Tychicus unless there had been a disconsolate series of Churches, who had made open expression of their disconsolation. These Churches were neighbouring Churches, especially if we are right in substituting Laodicea for Ephesus. The coincidence in their communication and in Paul's replies to them is perfectly natural; each had written saying, "We always pray for you. We hear you are in prison, and want to know how things are going with you."

There is no need to press either the underlying coincidence of the questions nor the parallelism of the replies into an argument against the genuineness of either Colossians or Ephesians, when we reflect that the same man (Epaphras) was scribe for the two Churches, or at least postman; and that the return-post was brought by the same man (Tychicus), as Epaphroditus did not return immediately. I do not mean to say there are no further difficulties in connection with the Ephesian-Colossian problem.

Now let us turn to the Epistle to the Philippians. This also is a reply to a letter already received; for (i.) it is clear that Epaphroditus brought a sum of money from Philippi, which means that he came to Rome overland from Colosse [Laodicea?] and Ephesus [?]. With this gift there was a [written] message that "we should have sent you help sooner, but we had no one to send by." This is involved in Philippians 4. 10, "Ye were anxious to send, but lacked opportunity." So far, it may be said, there is nothing that might not have been conveyed in an oral message. But on turning to the opening verses of the epistle, we find the same conventional epistolary turns and the same inquiry as to how things were going with him. With regard to the latter he says plainly (Phil. 1. 12), "I should like you to know that my affairs have turned out to the furtherance of the gospel," which implies inquiry as to his affairs. And with regard to the former, the conventional thanksgivings, remembering and longings to see one another, we have only to slightly modify the translation of Philippians 1. 7, *διὰ τὸ ἔχειν με ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν*, so as to read, "because you have me in your hearts," in order to see the traces of the very language employed in the Philippian letter to St. Paul.

Not to prolong the investigation further, we may say that there is reason to believe that when Epaphras came to Rome, he brought papers and parcels for Paul from Colosse,

Laodicea, and Philippi, travelling, as we have said, overland. The replies to the first of these were carried by Tychicus, who seems to have set out almost immediately. He did *not* travel overland; and at some later date Paul despatched Epaphras to go overland and carry return messages to Philippi.

It appears, then, that the consideration of the epistolary formulæ involved in the Pauline letters leads to important conclusions with regard to the circumstances of the despatch of those letters. So far as we have followed the matter, the inquiry is not unfavourable to a belief in the genuineness of some of the most important parts of the correspondence.

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